



Can a Veteran go into Law Enforcement after a PTSD Diagnosis? Law Enforcement's View of Hiring Veterans with PTSD

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Introduction

An estimated 1-2 out of every 10 soldiers returning from combat in Iraq will be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).¹ Many of these soldiers are self-conscious about the diagnosis. In a recent article about perceived barriers to care, half of Iraq and Afghanistan combat veterans with suspected mental disorders believed that receiving treatment would harm their careers. Another 65% stated that they would be considered weak for seeking help and many were afraid that their peers would lose confidence in their abilities.² This is a particular problem for veterans who may seek employment after military service, since few employers provide up-front information regarding pre-existing mental conditions. Anonymous questions about PTSD treatment and future employment dominate online discussion forums, and many erroneously assume and advise that outside agencies embrace a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. These findings suggest that veterans may not seek treatment for PTSD, fearing automatic disqualification from employment based on the diagnosis.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to better understand the hiring policies of employers in fields of law enforcement, specifically with regard to pre-existing mental conditions such as PTSD.

Data

Military service often provides individuals with a set of skills uniquely suited for employment in law enforcement settings. Consequently, many veterans seek employment as police officers and firefighters. Since it is common for law enforcement human resources departments to administer medical exams as part of the hiring process, efforts were made to contact these departments, or the clinicians directly. A minimum of 3 attempts at email or phone contact were made for each agency. Of the 12 law enforcement agencies contacted, 8 responded.

The following table describes each employer’s hiring policy in some detail. In each case, a psychological evaluation of the applicant was required; however, a separate evaluation for PTSD was not typically administered. The vast majority stated that a history of PTSD would not result in automatic disqualification. If the diagnosis was revealed during the medical or psychological exam, most agencies indicated that past medical records or military discharge forms would then be obtained. While PTSD was not viewed as cause for automatic disqualification, in the event that PTSD was not previously diagnosed but inconsistencies occurred in the applicant's employer-administered psychological evaluation, a thorough investigation of the individual’s medical record might ensue.

INSTITUTION	Psych Evaluation	PTSD-specific Evaluation	Automatic Disqualification for PTSD diagnosis	Other Exclusions	Medication Exclusions	Published Guidelines
San Diego Police Department	Yes	Unknown	Unknown	Medical capability is on a case-by-case basis	Unknown	Unknown
San Diego Fire Department	No	Unknown	Unknown	PTSD evaluated during medical exam	Unknown	Unknown
Los Angeles Police Department	Yes	When Appropriate	No	Psychological capability is on a case-by-case basis	Medications evaluated on a case-by-case basis	Unknown
California Highway Patrol	MMPI-2 and PF 16	No	No	No, medical/psych evaluation determines fitness for duty	Unknown	No
California Department of Forestry	Yes	No	No	Suddenly incapacitating issues (i.e. seizure disorders)	narcotics, sedative-hypnotics, tobacco use	National Fire Protection Association Guidelines
Seattle Police Department	Yes	Treatment records and standardized testing	No	Unknown	All medications evaluated on a case-by-case basis	Unknown
New York Police Department	MMPI and PF 16	No	No	All candidates assessed on a case-by-case basis	Duration of use for anti-psychotic meds reviewed	No
Boston Police Department	Yes	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	HR department approved psychological screening plan
Atlanta Police Department	Yes	Unknown	No	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Chicago Police Department	Yes	Unknown	Unknown	All conditions reviewed on a case-by-case basis	Unknown	No
Border Patrol	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Disorders affecting normal judgment and behavior	Psychotropic medication evaluated on case-by-case basis	Unknown
FBI	Unknown	Medical records, doctor's letter, polygraph test	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown

* Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory and the 16 Personality Factor Questionnaire



Although screening tools, such as the Clinician Administered PTSD Scale (CAPS), exist to evaluate levels of PTSD severity, no law enforcement agencies reported using one. Few employers provided information as to whether PTSD-specific evaluations were given, and in no instance were thresholds for disqualification disclosed. Additionally, two agencies of those who responded or provide freely accessible information online said they had written policies regarding mental health evaluations; only the California Department of Forestry makes its written policies publicly available. In most cases, the psychological assessment component of the hiring procedure is contracted out, and specific evaluation criteria were unknown by the agencies themselves.

It is particularly important for individuals with undiagnosed or untreated PTSD to receive treatment before seeking employment as law enforcement officers. Studies have shown that roughly 1/3 of paramedics^{3, 4} and a quarter of firefighters^{5, 6} experience PTSD symptoms at any given time as a result of working in constantly stressful occupations. It is also clear from the scientific literature that there is a direct correlation between the number of traumatic events that a person experiences and the development of PTSD. Researchers have estimated that 7-19% of all police officers develop PTSD symptoms after experiencing a traumatic event.⁷ Therefore, it is of utmost importance that a recruit be as physically and mentally healthy as possible.

Due to the stressful nature of law enforcement occupations, treatment for PTSD was viewed favorably by all responding agencies. A representative of the Los Angeles Police Department indicated that treatment for the disorder was highly regarded. Yet, it was also mentioned that if PTSD is a current condition that interferes with the applicant's ability to complete necessary job duties, the application would be denied. Similarly, the California Department of Forestry's policy stated that any suddenly incapacitating conditions, such as asthma or seizure disorders, would result in disqualification. Although not an automatically disqualifying condition, severe PTSD is cause for concern. Most agencies suggested that medication, including psychotropic medication, was evaluated to ensure that safe and efficient job performance would not be adversely affected.

Summary

- The underlying message is that if an applicant is not experiencing debilitating PTSD symptoms, they will be considered as equally as any applicant without a history of PTSD.
- Several agencies stated that they had hired individuals with histories of PTSD, although most agencies alluded that they had as well.
- Most agencies did not have specific protocols for evaluating PTSD, nor did they have policies regarding the prohibition of prescribed medications.
- Alleviation of PTSD symptoms through treatment was highly regarded and medical records were typically obtained to confirm adherence to treatment protocols.
- All agencies indicated that individual circumstances and PTSD diagnoses were evaluated on a case-by-case basis to determine if symptoms interfered with job requirements.



References

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